

Housing: The Key to Ending Homelessness
Year 4 of the 10-Year Plan and Beyond
Community Forum Report– May 13, 2011

On May 13th a group of around 50 people came together to discuss the issue of creating more affordable housing in the Allentown and surrounding communities.

Third Year Accomplishments

Chris Nelson and Lisa Pawlowski briefly discussed accomplishments and issues worked on during the past year by the 10 Year Plan and others in the community:

- Lehigh County Prison: Release Procedures and Identification issues
- Point in Time (PIT) Survey: 13 sites visited, 7 occupied; 22 Chronically homeless identified; 22 were disabled and 20 were male
- Grace House: New Bethany Ministries, Grace Episcopal Church & Lehigh County Conference of Churches opened in Allentown, April 2011 and is an SRO for Chronically homeless persons
- Safe Haven at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Allentown provided an overnight place to sleep for overflow from shelters and housing: 5 persons (average) used these temporary accommodations per night with visits from LCCC case workers
- Cold Weather Alerts: Expanded Advertisement for Plan
- City and County Stimulus Rental Assistance
- Veterans Sanctuary to open in July
- HEARTH Act: Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing definition has been expanded to Include Families
- 8th Street Bridge Closure –September 2010: Difficulty because of multiple owners and the uneven landscape. Successfully closed camp with: ample notice given to residents, most residents moved to housing, and no residents there on day authorities closed and cleaned up the site. PennDot supplied fencing to secure site
- Year 4 Goals Include: Protocol for Homeless Persons in Public Places, national movement to guide State Government officials, hospital discharge planning, affordable housing advocacy and the focus of this community forum: creating affordable housing
- Prevention Goals: address need for rental escrow accounts, rental inspections and "Unfit for Human Habitation" Closures

Keynote Speaker

Erin Mierzwa, Administration and Research, the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia This was data-packed and extremely informative.

Rental Housing Panel

Each panelist spoke on projects they are working on and planning for. Panelists included: Dave Evans, HADC; Gerry Alfano, ABC; Diane Elliot, New Bethany Ministries; Jan Creedon, Lehigh County; Lori Sywensky, Northampton County; Dan Farrell, Allentown Housing Authority

Legislative Updates

An energetic presentation was given by Elizabeth Hersch from Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania. She pointed out the variables in the State Budget and urged advocacy

Community Spotlight

Robert Csandl created awareness of the Veterans Sanctuary opening in Allentown this July.

Breakout Groups

Three breakout groups met to discuss the following issues: What are the barriers you experience in creating affordable housing and what are creative and realistic solutions and next steps.

Service Providers

Barriers:

- Lack of funds
- Waiting lists
- Criminal history
- Other protocol/rules to get in the door
- Negative credit history
- Re-socializing people with new values
- Lack of time to change attitudes/behaviors/values
- Lack of natural community supports
- Single parent families (one income to provide for numbers of people)
- Lack of community knowledge about plight of neighbors
- Documentation
- Competition

- Lack of skills: social skills, budgeting
- Tenant readiness
- Mental health – intergenerational patterns
- Drug and alcohol; intergenerational lack of education
- Lack of coordination/networking between agencies/needs
- Time limits on recovery (45 days, etc)

Solutions:

- Networking (no one person has all answers)
- Project-Based funding: Team up families to bring more income in
- Shared living
- Match people up who want to help
- Funds
- Families mentoring families
- Prison model changing from warehousing to rehabbing: parenting: connect parents and children; re-entry work with agencies
- Fixing the school system to limit truancy
- Non-profit change to add for-profit arm: (cleaning service, delivery services, branch projects; job training)
- Accurate assessment of individual (looking holistically at their life)
- Documentation: computer systems
- Stop bureaucracy that slows help to people
 - Survival mode of clients – get them out of it so they can hear
 - Stick with people to get out of survival mode
 - Take care of basic needs first: food, etc.
- Copy what works
- Don't be afraid to try new things
- Stop allowing insurance companies to make the rules on recovery

Legislation and Advocacy

Barriers:

- There needs to be money with flexibility and less restrictions than some current funding streams.
- Funding cuts with no justification given
- Most funding comes from government sources
- Lack of public discussion and debate
- Agencies not being heard by public officials
- Need community involvement and advocacy
- Competition between social services for funding

Solutions:

- Need to elevate crisis to the public (who tend to respond to natural crises)
- Change rhetoric – people don't understand what welfare is.
- Conduct a "Day Without Social Services": are agencies buffering so well that the problem isn't understood?
- It is a chipping away process, message is being heard, keep up the good work
- Invitation to representatives to live a day in the shoes of the homeless/poverty simulation. Michael Tukeva, Poconos Helathy Community Alliance just did one.
- Work with Rooster to get campaign of letters or cards from kids in his program
- Clergy have responsibility to relay message
- Conduct a homeless walk/rally to raise awareness
- Interfaith network to shelter homeless

HOUSING SERVICES

Barriers:

- Too few financial resources
- Onerous regulations
- Great competition for limited resources
- Weak system for property acquisition
- High cost of construction and renovation
- Low-capacity capabilities of nonprofit developers

Creative and Realistic Solutions, Next Steps:

- Favor renovation over new construction to minimize regulations and cost.
- The location has to work
- Smarter funding to ensure cash flow and ongoing operations.
- Address capacity through collaboration and partnerships with nonprofits, faith organizations and others
- Involve homeless people directly in the discussion and planning
- Inventory and take advantage of the all-time high in the availability of unused schools, churches and municipal property for reuse as supportive housing

For more information about joining the 10 Year Plan for Ending Chronic Homelessness, please contact Lauren Giguere at giguere@allentowncity.org or 610-439-5965 for more information.